

Senate Education Committee Hearing
Wednesday, September 28, 2011
Testimony of Birgit McQuiston, MI-CAPE

Honorable members of the Senate Education Committee: Good afternoon, and thank you for allowing me to address you today. My name is Birgit McQuiston. I am a parent, community member, a member of the Lake Orion Community Schools Board of Education, and founding member of Michigan Citizens Advocating for Public Education (MI-CAPE). I am here today representing MI-CAPE to express our opposition to section 105 of SB624. Specifically, our concern is regarding the language that diminishes local control and decision making and seeks to mandate statewide out of district enrollment.

As you know, in our state we have approximately 550 traditional school districts. For argument sake let's say that each of these districts has 7 school board members. This means that there are, within our state, over 3,800 ELECTED school board officials. They represent one of THE largest elected bodies of officials that we have. They are elected by their LOCAL communities and are endowed with the awesome responsibility of governing over their local school districts. The very process of electing school board members is an exercise of democracy at its most basic and local level! The wording of section 105 of SB624 obstructs this time-honored process. At best, this is disturbing.

Open enrollment has been and continues to be a choice for school districts. Approximately 83% of the districts, under the leadership of their school boards, have CHOSEN to include open enrollment as a means to increase their student population and thus their revenue. The remaining 17% have CHOSEN – under the leadership of their school boards, NOT to participate. The passage of legislation that forces the remaining schools to participate would not only interfere with the local authority structure in place, but would not effectively solve the core issues of the failing districts. What about the students left behind? What are the answers for their ongoing dilemma?

Consider the problems that would undoubtedly be created for districts required to accept students from outside their communities:

- In-district students will no longer have first priority to attend a school building within their district that is not within their attendance area.
- In-district students who apply to an intra-district school of choice will no longer have priority to attend. In Lake Orion, we have intra-district schools of choice, and the "new" wording will have a profound effect on our community!
- If a non-resident student comes from a school district with a lesser foundation allowance, that district can only collect the lower amount from the state to educate that student. At minimum, that means that funds spent on the in-district students will be diminished so that non-resident students can be educated there. But in the event that remedial work is needed to bring that student up to grade-level, it will cost the district additional time, money and resources, while likely having a negative impact on the receiving district's achievement levels for MME, ACT as well as AYP.
- Non-residents will not be responsible for contributing to the repayment of any school debt but will realize, for free, the advantages for which the local community is paying.

MI-CAPE members attended a Town Hall meeting that the Michigan State Board of Education held on June 20, at Wayne County Community College in Detroit. We were originally hoping to ask some questions of the state board of education. As it turned out, earlier that day, Governor Snyder announced the take-over of the lowest performing schools in Detroit and the Emergency Finance Manager barred the public, the media, the Detroit School Boards as well as the State Board of Education from attending that press conference. As you can imagine, the community forum hosted by the state board of education that evening was packed. We opted to sit back and listen for the entire 3 hours of that meeting as parent after parent, and teacher after teacher, administrators, community groups and legislators addressed the state board of education with their concerns. That day, our group heard passion pouring out of the hearts of Detroiters regarding the education of THEIR children. I can tell you, their concerns were not so different from anyone else's. Not once did I hear any of them say that they wanted their children in a different district. No. They want their children to receive an excellent

education IN DETROIT! Why should they have to take their kids to a different community? Why do we continue to fail those children?

We sincerely appreciate that the Education Committee seeks to help solve the disparity of public education within our state. We agree that the students whose school districts are failing them deserve a system that affords them an excellent education. We suggest, however, that they deserve to receive that education in their own communities. Instead of forcing other districts to pick-up the pieces of the failed educational systems, why not strive to actually fix the problems?

I hold in my hands a copy of The Constitution of the State of Michigan. Under Article I, the Declaration of Rights, number 1 says: All political power is inherent the people. It is our sincere hope that the legislators of Michigan are listening to the voices of the people of Michigan, and not the voices of national level lobbying groups who specialize in model legislation that THEY want to see you enact! No, the education of our children is a sacred trust that can't be legislated away. The future of our communities, our state, and indeed our nation is dependent upon the education of our children. Your constituents are making their voices heard... For the sake of our future, I sincerely hope you are listening.

Thank you for your time and attention.